

Summary report

Branching out: a new ambition for woodland policies

July 2017



National Assembly for Wales
Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

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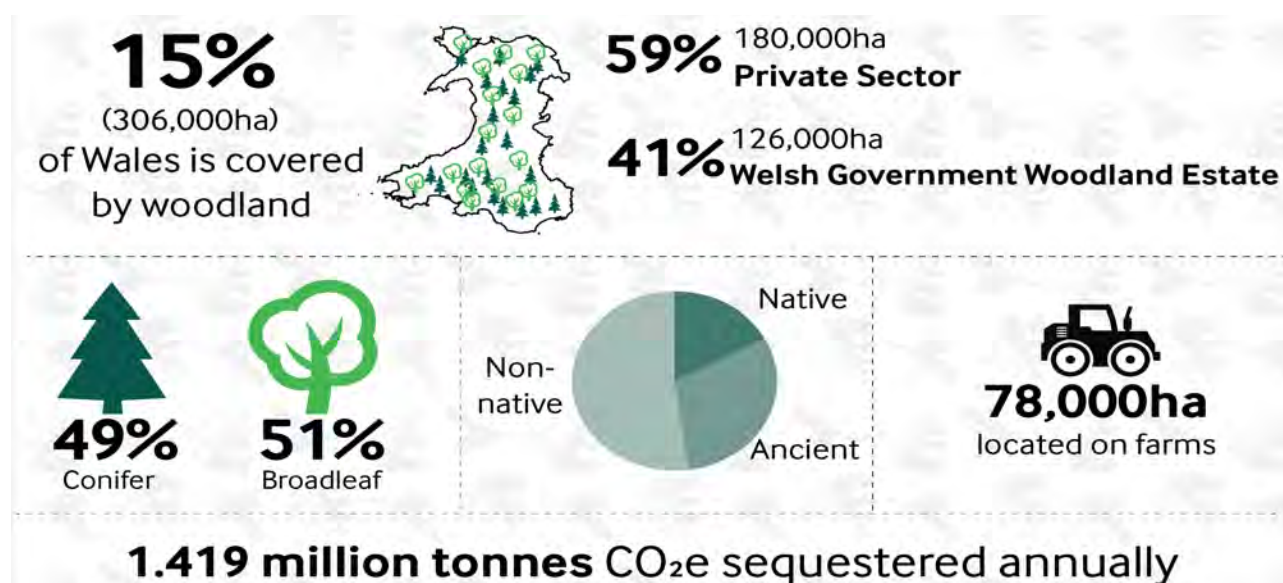
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Report summary

Woodlands for Wales (2009) is the Welsh Government's 50 year strategy for woodlands and trees. The strategy is implemented through five-year action plans; the first published by Forestry Commission Wales in 2010, and the second by the Welsh Government in 2015. The current action plan¹ runs until 31 March 2020.

The Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee held an inquiry between February and July 2017 into how well Woodlands for Wales is being delivered². This report sets out our findings, and the recommendations the Welsh Government should deliver in order to realise our vision for taking Welsh woodlands forwards.

Key facts



Economic impacts



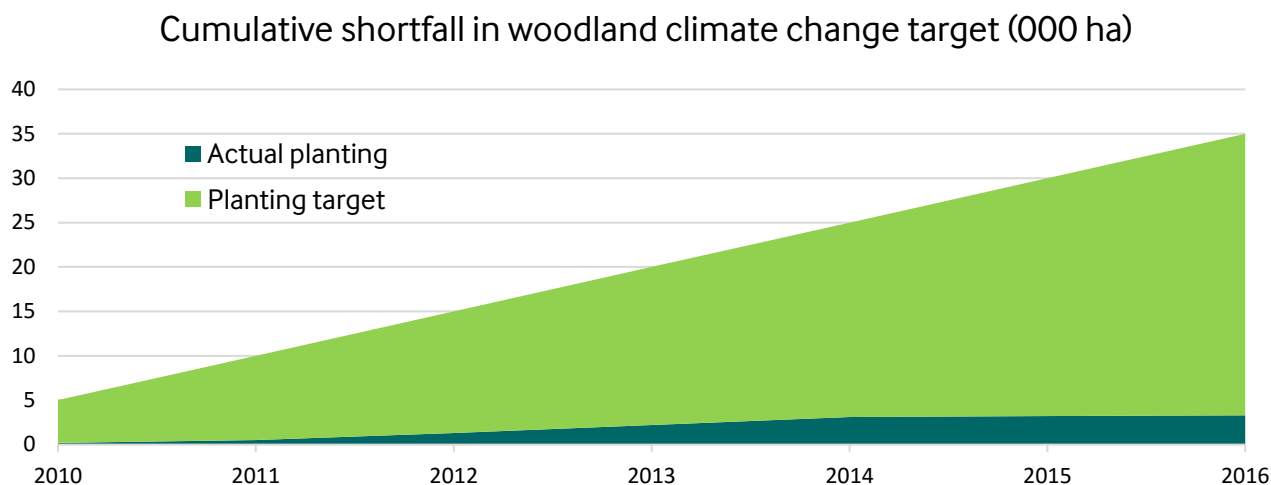
Biodiversity



¹ Welsh Government, [Woodlands for Wales Action Plan, 2015-2020](#)

² National Assembly for Wales, [Forestry and woodland policy in Wales, 2017](#)

Woodland creation and restocking



Source: Welsh Government, December 2015

Lack of new woodland creation

Since 2010, Wales has managed to plant just one-tenth of its target of 35,000 ha, with 90% of this being broadleaved woodland, and planting rates since 2014 have been especially poor.

We are pleased that the Welsh Government will maintain the target of 100,000 ha of new woodland creation between 2010-2030, and will refresh the Woodlands for Wales strategy. However, there is a massive gap between aspiration and reality, and fundamental change in the approach to woodland creation in Wales is needed. It is unclear how the Cabinet Secretary intends to address this.

We urge the Welsh Government to incorporate long term targets for woodland cover in Wales by 2050 and 2100, and to better reflect the economic benefits of forestry. The Welsh Government must lead by example and increase afforestation on public land, and Natural Resources Wales (NRW) must be more proactive in seizing opportunities for woodland creation on such land.

Barriers and solutions

The greatest barrier to woodland planting was believed by the commercial forestry sector to be the overly-rigorous enforcement of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) regulations. We are pleased that the Welsh Government and NRW are willing to investigate innovative ways to improve the implementation of the EIA process, provide additional guidance and support to applicants, and to better align the regulatory and funding processes. This must be progressed as a matter of urgency and must deliver an increase in planting.

Farmers are deterred from planting woodland by a number of bureaucratic, financial and cultural barriers. Glastir woodland schemes are too complex and prescriptive, and the payments are too low compared to the Basic Payment Scheme payments received for agricultural land. Furthermore, they are put off by the permanence of the land use change, and the long-term nature of the payback.

The end of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funding after 2020 provides an opportunity to reconsider the approach to such payments. We welcome the Welsh Government's commitment to consider innovative approaches to payment, including Payments for Ecosystem Services. Funding post-Brexit is discussed further in Chapter 6.

Despite its shortcomings, the Glastir Woodland Opportunities Map is a good starting point. However, its primary use appears to be limited to being a tool for use at a strategic level. We believe the map should be refocused so that it is a decision making tool and enabler of woodland creation on the ground. Aligning the map with the regulatory process and local authority planning would lead to greater benefits. For example, regulatory barriers could be relaxed for areas that the map reveals as being most suitable for woodland creation. The Welsh Government should also work with NRW to make the map more user-friendly for specific user groups.

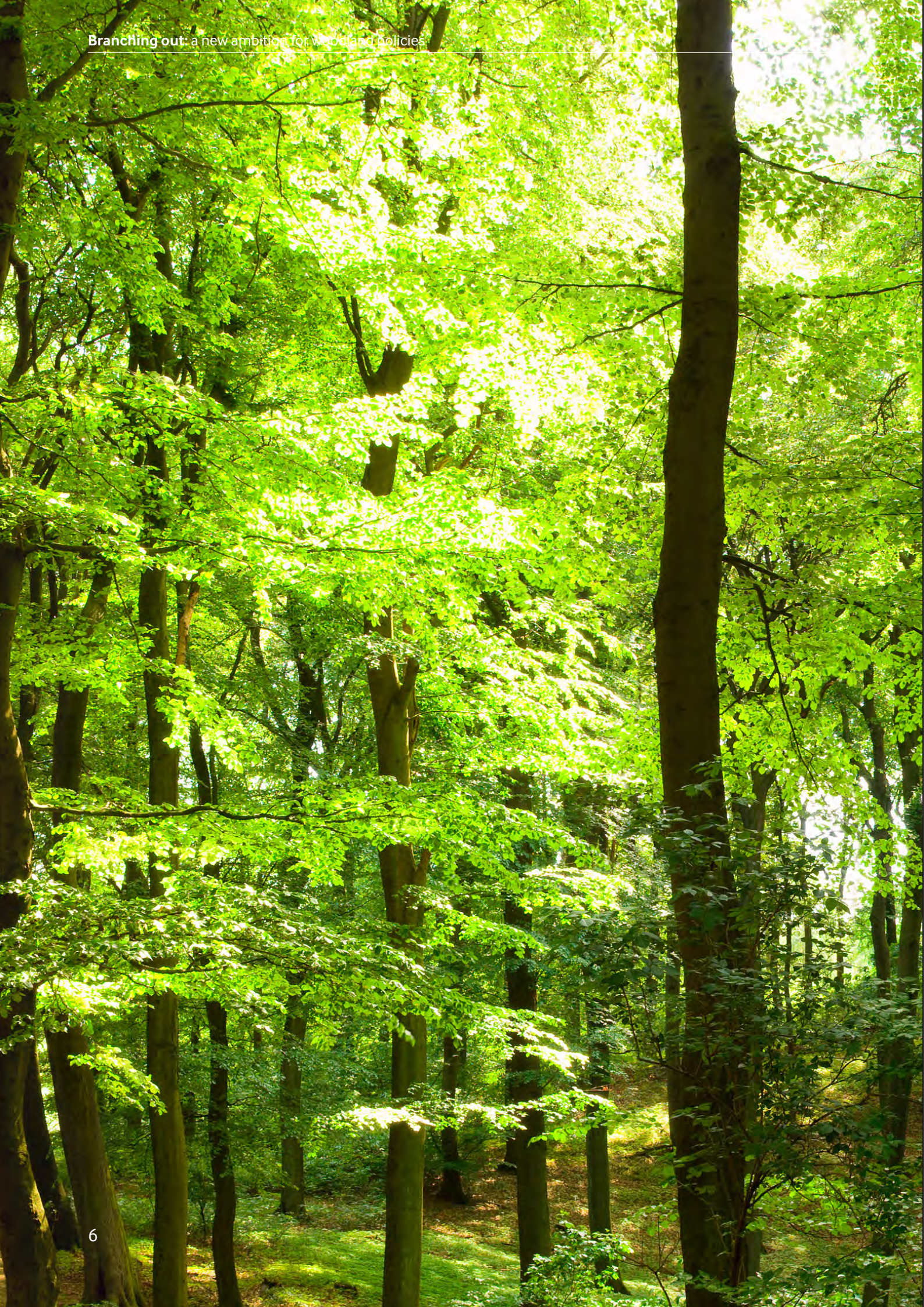
Showing land use and land cover data on the Woodland Opportunity Map would also make it more relevant to land use planning. We note that forestry is excluded from the legal definition of 'development' in the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, and that forestry does not feature prominently in Local Development Plans (LDPs) or the Welsh Government's national planning policy. However, LDPs also designate land for non-development uses such as open space, green belt, and environmental protection areas. As such, we suggest that there is potential for local authorities to use the map to guide decisions on land for afforestation. We believe that the Welsh Government should consider how it can encourage such an approach.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – The Welsh Government must, as a matter of urgency, refresh its woodland strategy with the aim of significantly increasing planting rates. The refreshed strategy must include long term targets for woodland cover and must incorporate commercial forestry.

Recommendation 2 – The Welsh Government must address the barriers to increasing planting, in particular by:

- Aligning the regulatory and funding processes, and providing additional guidance and support to applicants.
- Adopting a presumption of approval for applications in areas identified by the Woodland Opportunities Map as having a high suitability for woodland.
- Making the Woodland Opportunities Map more user-friendly to a range of different user groups, and linking it in with the land use planning system.



Responding to climate change

Trees and woodlands act as a nature-based solution to tackling the effects of climate change, both by sequestering carbon and by helping to manage flood risk in both urban and rural areas.

Unfortunately, the lack of planting has reduced the ability of Wales to use new woodland as a tool to mitigate against climate change. We note the Welsh Government's commitment to look at proposals to 'scale up' woodland planting as part of the process for developing its Low Carbon Delivery Plan by spring 2019, and encourage the wider adoption of the Woodland Carbon Code. Further detail is needed from Welsh Government about how this will be achieved.

Adaptation to the increased risk of flooding also requires a greater focus on planting more trees, especially upstream of flood-prone environments and in urban areas. The Welsh Government must provide clear incentives and guidance for land owners and managers to plant trees for this purpose, and to develop and introduce Payments for Ecosystem Services schemes. We believe that the refreshed Woodlands for Wales strategy must explicitly encourage the planting of trees and woodlands to help manage flood risk.

The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 requires public bodies in Wales to adopt more long-term thinking and to address issues such as climate change. Woodlands are ideally placed to deliver both the aspirations of the Act and to help tackle climate change. The revised strategy should aim to encourage Public Services Boards to promote woodland creation and sustainable drainage in their Local Wellbeing Plans.

This chapter explores how well the Welsh Government's strategy is meeting its objectives to increase the number of people benefitting from trees and woodlands in terms of: quality of life in urban areas; community engagement; lifelong learning, and health and wellbeing. The Woodlands for Wales Indicators 2015-16³ showed that public perception, community involvement, and use of woodlands for recreation are all improving. We heard that good progress has been made under this theme of the strategy; however, there is still room for improvement.

Recommendations

Recommendation 3 – The Welsh Government must specify how it will use trees and woodlands as a nature based solution to flooding, and facilitate expansion of the Woodland Carbon Code.

³ [Woodlands for Wales Indicators 2015-16](#)

Woodlands for people

Urban trees

Trees in and near to urban areas have substantial environmental, social and economic benefits, including direct and indirect improvements to people's health, wellbeing and quality of life. The Welsh Government must address the declining trend in urban tree canopy cover across Wales, and set out a plan to achieve at least 20% tree cover in each of Wales' towns and cities by 2030. There is a need to increase urban tree canopy cover – especially in priority areas where canopy cover is low – and this should also be addressed through Local Well-being Plans and Area Statements.

However, increasing canopy cover is just the start. In order to increase provision of ecosystem services in our towns and cities – to address issues such as flooding, air pollution, and physical and mental health issues – it is necessary to ensure that the right trees are planted and managed in the right places. We welcome the Cabinet Secretary's commitment to issue guidance to local planning authorities on planting and replacing urban trees, and recommend that this draws on research undertaken by the Forestry Commission⁴ and others⁵.

Community engagement and regeneration

We welcome the Welsh Government's intention to increase funding for small community woodland groups, and work that is already underway with NRW and Llais y Goedwig to improve guidance (including case study examples) for these groups. We also support the proposal in the White Paper on access reform to extend NRW's power to delegate its forest management functions to local communities.

We believe that forestry and woodlands have a significant role to play in regenerating the former mining communities of the south Wales valleys. As such, we welcome the Cabinet Secretary's willingness to consider 'radical' initiatives such as a Welsh 'National Forest', and suggest that she looks into this further. We hope that woodland regeneration can be pursued more vigorously by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust across Wales. We also encourage linking regeneration policies with other initiatives in Area Statements and Local Wellbeing Plans.

Regarding education, the Welsh Government should ensure that tree planting and woodland education is incorporated into the National Curriculum, and extend its support of the Welsh Baccalaureate work with community groups.

⁴ Forestry Commission, [Delivery of ecosystem services by urban forests](#), 2017

⁵ [Challenges for tree officers to enhance the provision of regulating ecosystem services from urban forests](#)

Access and recreation

The recreational value of woodland is substantial; however, there are still many woodlands that are inaccessible to the public, and various groups of people that are marginalised. We encourage NRW to open up areas of the public woodland estate that are currently underused, and to focus on promoting and improving access for disabled people, deprived communities and minority ethnic groups. In terms of privately owned woodlands, we support the use of Payment for Ecosystem Services schemes to incentivise land owners to enable recreational access to their land.

In the absence of new legislation on access reform, we encourage NRW to be proactive regarding extending and better managing woodland access. For example, where appropriate, we recommend opening up woodlands to licensed, and therefore paid, use by groups engaging in noisy or high-speed activities such as shooting and use of motorised vehicles. Not only will this increase woodland revenue, but it should also reduce illegal use of woodlands elsewhere.

Recommendations

Recommendation 4 – The Welsh Government must commit to ensuring a minimum of 20% urban tree canopy cover, to be addressed through Local Well-being Plans and Area Statements.

Recommendation 5 – Woodlands can be an effective tool for regeneration and engaging local communities. The Welsh Government must harness this and, as a starting point, should:

- Increase support to community woodland groups.
- Assess the potential for developing a National Forest Company to help regenerate the south Wales valleys.
- Ensure that woodland education is incorporated into education policies.

Recommendation 6 – The Welsh Government must extend and better manage access to public woodlands, especially for marginalised groups. NRW should examine options for recovering costs from user groups for certain recreational activities in the woodlands it manages.

Recommendation 7 – The Welsh Government should clarify its timetable for bringing forward proposals on access reform.

A competitive and integrated forest sector

Constraints on the sector

The British sawmilling sector is one of the most technically advanced in Europe but, with planting and restocking rates so low, investment in sawmilling capacity is leaving Wales and moving to Scotland. We are greatly concerned about the impact this, along with the declining supply of softwood, will have on the future of Welsh sawmilling, and also on our rural communities.

We are also concerned at the lack of restocking and woodland creation on NRW managed land and the reducing scale of commercial forestry operations by NRW. Given the significant shortfall in woodland planting towards the annual 5,000 ha target, and the desire to increase production of home-grown timber, we are concerned that the Welsh Government and NRW are not practising what they preach.

Another constraint on the sector is the long-standing cultural divide between forestry and agriculture. The Welsh Government must use Brexit as an opportunity to bring the two sectors together, including promoting the commercial and other benefits of woodlands within the farming community. We are pleased at the Cabinet Secretary's commitment to this, and support the introduction of a 'Sheep and Trees' grant in Wales.

Like the farming sector, forestry is also suffering from an ageing workforce, with young people seemingly unaware of the broad range of technical, planning and managerial roles available in the sector. The Welsh Government should address this by reviving the forest education programme; expanding NRW's Trees and Timber Apprenticeship scheme; extending the Focus on Forestry First project; promoting qualifications such as the City & Guilds diploma in Forestry and Arboriculture; and ensuring that careers advice in schools promotes rural as well as urban employment opportunities.



Members of the Committee planting a tree at the Spirit of Llynfi Woodland.

Potential for growth

Wales currently supplies just 6% of the timber demanded in the UK each year, with the UK importing substantial quantities from abroad. Provided the shortfall in afforestation can be addressed, we believe Wales has a fantastic opportunity to meet substantially more of this demand, and to move towards self-sufficiency in timber production.

The push for increased sustainability in construction and reduced carbon footprints in the UK and beyond means that demand for home-grown timber should rise substantially. We commend Powys County Council for introducing a Wood Encouragement Policy, and we encourage all local authorities to take a similar approach. As such, we support the Cabinet Secretary's willingness to consider changing the Building Regulations to promote the use of timber in construction.

Overall, we commend the intention of the Cabinet Secretary to address the barriers faced by the commercial forestry sector. We feel this should be driven by a substantial change to the Woodlands for Wales strategy, with far greater focus placed on the economic and sustainability benefits of well managed commercial forestry. We also encourage the Welsh Government and NRW to engage in more open public-private-third sector partnerships to improve communication within, and the perception of, the commercial forestry sector.

Recommendations

Recommendation 8 – The Welsh Government must address the constraints on the commercial forestry sector, in particular by:

- Facilitating coniferous woodland creation and commercial operations on both public and private land.
- Promoting to the farming community the commercial and other benefits of planting trees on agricultural land, and enabling farmers to do this through additional, simple and flexible grant payments.
- Providing and promoting training in forestry, woodland management and woodland planning.

Recommendation 9 – The potential for growth in the commercial forestry sector should be actively supported by Welsh Government. In particular, it should:

- Agree with the forestry sector ambitious targets for Wales to become increasingly self-sufficient in timber production and less reliant on imports.
- Consider changing the building regulations to promote the use of timber in construction.

Environmental quality

Woodland management

40% of Welsh woodlands are thought to be unmanaged (mainly privately owned broadleaf woodlands), resulting in a lack of biodiversity and the potential environmental benefits not being realised. We urge the Welsh Government to bring back the Glastir Woodland Management grant scheme, and to set a target to halve the proportion of unmanaged woodlands in Wales.

Regarding commercial woodlands, compliance with the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS) is only monitored when permission is being sought from NRW for planting or felling activities. As such, there are concerns that minimum ecological standards are not being met. We support calls from environmental stakeholders for the Welsh Government to encourage take-up of the higher UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS), perhaps through greater promotion of Forestry Stewardship Council certified wood products. Furthermore, should the Glastir Woodland Management scheme be reintroduced, we recommend that this requires compliance with UKWAS.

Conifer plantations and tree health

We share stakeholders' belief that woodlands should be mixed, both in terms of species and age structure. However, we feel that this should occur at the landscape rather than the local scale. We call on the Welsh Government and NRW to advocate a mosaic approach to woodland planning and management, comprising linked blocks of trees (and other habitats) serving different purposes. This would benefit forestry operations, biodiversity, ecosystem services provision, and resilience to tree diseases.

We have some concerns over the response of NRW to recent outbreaks of Ash Dieback and Larch Disease. NRW appears to have acted with less coordination and transparency than counterparts in England and Scotland regarding Larch Disease, and stakeholders are concerned that there is still no plan for supporting those who have lost trees to the diseases. The Welsh Government plans to bring stakeholders together to address these issues and we recommend that this results in new strategic policy to minimise susceptibility to future disease outbreaks. We support NRW's requirement for restocking on public land to use home-grown rather than imported saplings, and encourage this be extended to private land.

Restoration of Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS)

Ancient woodlands are an important contributor to biodiversity and the Welsh landscape and we commend the Welsh Government's desire to restore PAWS. However, whilst there are regulatory barriers to creation of new coniferous woodland, and no funding available to manage private broadleaved woodland, it is unrealistic to expect PAWS restoration to occur. These regulatory and funding issues must be addressed.

The right trees in the right places

We support the principle of planting the right trees in the right places (as promoted in the State of Natural Resources Report⁶) to maximise the benefits of trees and woodlands, especially in urban areas. However, we share the concern of a number of stakeholders that this term is too broad and open to interpretation depending on different points of view. The Woodlands for Wales strategy must draw on available research to specify what the most suitable types of trees, management approaches and planting locations are for achieving each of its aims.

Recommendations

Recommendation 10 – The Welsh Government should reintroduce the Glastir Woodland Management Scheme and ensure that planting meets the UK Woodland Assurance Standard.

Recommendation 11 – The Welsh Government must work with stakeholders to ensure its tree health strategy demonstrates the lessons learnt from the outbreaks of Ash Dieback and Larch Disease.

⁶ NRW, *State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR)*, 2016

Future delivery of the Woodlands for Wales strategy

Taking the strategy forwards

It is clear from our extensive discussions with stakeholders that, whilst progress is being made under the Woodlands for People theme, the severe lack of woodland creation in Wales in recent years is preventing delivery of many other aspects of the strategy. The Welsh Government must address the barriers to woodland creation as a matter of urgency.

We welcome the Cabinet Secretary's agreement to refresh Woodlands for Wales by early 2018, and her openness to radical thinking, as we feel that the strategy (and delivery of it) must undergo significant improvement. We call on the Welsh Government to put greater focus on the economic benefits of commercial forestry, and to prioritise innovative funding mechanisms to secure public benefits from urban and rural trees and woodlands. The decision to leave the EU presents a new challenge to enhance the sustainability of land management in Wales, and to better integrate forestry with agriculture⁷.

The emerging Natural Resources Policy, and NRW's implementation of it, must align with Woodlands for Wales. The revised strategy must also explicitly align with the Well-being of Future Generations Act and the Environment Act. Public Services Boards and local authorities should also be required to contribute to meeting the objectives of Woodlands for Wales through their Local Well-being Plans and Area Statements.

In light of conflicting views on the purpose of the Woodland Strategy Advisory Panel (WSAP), we believe the Welsh Government should make WSAP's Terms of Reference available to the public. It should expand WSAP's membership to include all principal stakeholders, and set out clearly what WSAP aims to do in order to take the strategy forward. We support the view of NRW that WSAP should be more effective in driving change, and given powers to work with Public Services Boards.

⁷ The findings of our inquiry into [The Future of Land Management in Wales \(PDF 2 MB\)](#) are also relevant here.

Innovation in funding post-Brexit

CAP is considered to be a significant barrier to tree planting, both in terms of funding and fuelling the cultural divide between farming and forestry. Brexit provides an opportunity to remove this historical and artificial divide, and to develop a single integrated sustainable land management scheme. The promotion of agroforestry, large woodlands, and a mosaic of different woodland types should form a key part of this.

The revised Woodlands for Wales strategy should be proactive in setting out innovative proposals for post-Brexit funding. In particular, we welcome the Welsh Government and NRW working together on developing Payments for Ecosystem Services. However, we urge this to go beyond the typical focus on carbon and water quality to encompass all ecosystem service benefits, and to cover both rural and urban environments. For instance, Greener Grangetown and the Spirit of Llynfi Woodland are excellent examples of private sector contributions to water regulation and health benefits in urban and semi-urban locations.

By treating woodland as a form of infrastructure, a range of potential funding options are possible. The Welsh Government should therefore look into innovative methods for financing woodland; for instance, through public-private ventures, public pension schemes, private investors, loans, compensatory funding from developers, lottery funding and taxation. We also support the NRW proposal to link the regulatory and funding processes to streamline woodland creation.

For the south Wales valleys in particular, we recommend that the Welsh Government looks into the possibility of forming a National Forest Company for Wales to work with farmers and local authorities.

Recommendations

Recommendation 12 – The Welsh Government must improve delivery of the Woodlands for Wales strategy, in particular by:

- Addressing the barriers to woodland creation as a matter of urgency.
- Revising the strategy by early 2018, and specifying how it will support and be supported by the Future Generations Act, the Environment Act, and the Natural Resources Policy.
- Improving the transparency and power of WSAP to drive the strategy forwards.

Recommendation 13 – As recommended in the Committee’s report on the future of land management in Wales, the Welsh Government must ensure that future funding should be based on sustainable outcomes. This approach could be supported by innovative methods such as Payments for Ecosystem Services and pension fund investment in green infrastructure.

